

Pepco: Recent work should cut storm outages

Utility expects fewer problems in county this winter thanks to technology, tree trimming, other measures

by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer | November 17, 2010

Under pressure from ratepayers and regulators to avoid the same kind of mammoth power failures that left hundreds of thousands shivering or sweating in the dark after last winter's and summer's storms, Pepco has completed many measures to reduce outages it promised three months ago, officials said Tuesday.

Pepco customers west of Interstate 270, in Gaithersburg, Rockville and Potomac, should experience fewer and shorter outages because the utility has installed automated switching for the distribution system in their area.

If a tree falls on a circuit, in many cases, customers in that area will experience only momentary outages because their power supply automatically will be switched to another circuit, said Gary Keeler, Pepco's reliability program manager.

The new "distribution automation" technology is installed in the Oak Grove area of Prince George's County but the installation in Montgomery is the county's first, Keeler said.

A \$15 million U.S. Department of Energy grant helped pay for adding the technology.

In addition, Pepco has completed 800 miles of tree trimming along power lines, which is half of the 1,600 miles the utility has promised its customers in Montgomery, Prince George's and the District of Columbia to head-off outages from downed limbs and trunks.

Trimming was done "predominantly in Montgomery, but was spread across the county and focused on areas where circuits had the worst outage history this year," Keeler said.

At 75 percent of Pepco's high-voltage substations, at least one of three supply lines have been made as invulnerable as possible to ensure power supply, Keeler said. By the end of December, 100 percent of substations will have at least one "hardened" supply line, he said.

The utility also has replaced the worst underground cables serving 10,000 households in subdivisions built in the 1970s in Montgomery and Prince George's, Keeler said.

Also, improvements and capacity are being added at 85 percent of the 38 worst-performing feeder lines, he said.

Compared to customers of neighboring Baltimore Gas and Electric Co., Pepco customers lost power 61 percent more often in 2009, when there were no major storm outages, according to reports the utilities filed with the Maryland Public Service Commission.

Pepco customers lose power more often, and for longer, than most consumers in the nation or Maryland, and have for several years, Pepco executives admitted to the PSC in August before they rolled out details of a promise to step up work to improve reliability.

The utility has a plan to increase spending by more than 81 percent – from \$141.5 million to \$256.5 million. That proposal goes to the utility's board of directors in December for approval, spokesman Bob Hainey said.

"We are confident with this plan that we will be at least average or above within five years," Pepco senior vice president for asset management and planning, William Gausman, told The Gazette in August.

The largest chunk of the proposed increase, \$75 million, would go toward selective burying of power lines and upgrades to substations. No money for that work is in Pepco's current approved five-year plan. The second largest chunk, \$15 million, would go toward trimming trees and vines that Pepco says are the biggest reason — along with property owners who don't want their trees cut — for service interruptions, particularly during storms.

Although the PSC requires electric utilities to report outage data, including the utility's average number of power outages per customer, and their average power outage duration per customer, it does not set standards or prescribe penalties.

Several state lawmakers have criticized the utility and the PSC for not doing enough to make electric service reliable. Complaints, and the urging of Gov. Martin O'Malley and other lawmakers, led the PSC to open an investigation this summer into Pepco's performance.

Del. Brian J. Feldman (D-Dist. 15) of Potomac has drafted a proposal that would require the Public Service Commission to set reliability standards by 2012, and would reduce utilities' profits incrementally for failing to meet those standards.